



DCF event gives Hispanic foster kids a chance to learn about heritage

By Michelle Tuccitto Sullo
Naugatuck Valley Bureau Chief

SHELTON — Fifteen-year-old Diamond Rosa-Matos will be putting on a white strapless gown and tiara, and having her hair, makeup and nails done professionally today for her "Quinceanera," the Hispanic culture's celebration of a young woman's move from childhood to adulthood.

Diamond is living with a foster family here and attends Shelton High School.

For the first time, the state Department of Children and Families is sponsoring a "Quinceanera" event for young Hispanic women like Diamond in its care, with the hope that they will learn more about their background, culture and traditions.

DCF, which is paying for the girls' gowns and preparations, hopes to

Diamond Rosa-Matos, 15, of Shelton shows some of the books she received from the Department of Children and Families. Diamond will take part in a "Quinceanera" tonight, a celebration for young Hispanic women.

Melanie Stengel/Register

make it an annual event to recognize the girls' achievements and promise.

"It is something that is once in a lifetime," said Diamond, whose parents are Puerto Rican. "When I'm older, I can tell my children about how I had an opportunity to meet other girls in the same situation as me, and it was a process I didn't go through alone."

The traditional celebration of a young Latina girl's 15th birthday includes religion, family, friends, music, food and dance.

The 14 young women who were selected to participate all submitted essays.

Most are living in private foster homes around the state.

Diamond was the only one selected living in the New Haven area.

In her essay, Diamond said, "Being Hispanic or of any race or ethnicity is something to celebrate. This program will help me learn more about my specific culture and would encourage me to become more involved with it, and therefore, celebrate that special part of me."

Today's ceremony is at St. Joseph College in West Hartford, and will

be followed by a dinner and dance reception at the Connecticut Convention Center in Hartford.

Male relatives will change the girls' slippers to high-heeled shoes, to represent their progression from children to young adults.

In preparation for the event, the participants have been having rehearsals for a dance performance and workshops on etiquette and table manners.

DCF gave the teens several books to help them learn more about their cultural background, like Spanish to English dictionaries and Spanish cookbooks.

Diamond, who spent a portion of her childhood in New Haven, has been living with the Lornie family in Shelton for about two years.

Through the DCF program, she said she has met the other Hispanic girls in foster care and established friendships with them.

Joan Mayo, an adolescent worker with DCF, said it is a "once in a lifetime opportunity for the girls."

"It is showing them that they are important," Mayo said. "Just because they are in the care of DCF, it doesn't mean they aren't special. We want them to know

they are special to us. This is something to help them embrace their traditions, and let them know they can still take part in their culture. We want them to keep their Spanish identity."

Diamond, who wants to go to college and become a plastic surgeon one day, said she previously had heard about the "Quinceanera" custom from Hispanic friends.

Sharon Lornie, her foster mother, said, "I think it is a wonderful opportunity for them. It gives them an opportunity to be part of their heritage. A lot of times these girls lose that when you take them and put them in homes that don't have the Hispanic culture. Diamond is excited and she is going to be beautiful."

Many of the girls wrote in their essays about being abused or neglected in their youth.

Many have been placed with non-Hispanic families, and know little about their cultural background. All wrote about their desire to learn more about where they came from, according to DCF.

Michelle Tuccitto Sullo can be reached at mtuccitto@nhregister.com or 789-5707.



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